

Mental Health & The Drug War

Trevor Phillippi

Mental illness is a growing problem in western civilization that has existed for some time now. Our culture in its currently does not understand it, is ill-equipped to deal with it, and refuses to have informed and candid discussion in the public sphere. There is an extreme lack of mental health resources and infrastructure provided in the manner that general public health is administered. Mental health issues typically only wind up in the news when something terrible happens such as a mass murder or the suicide of a celebrity, which contributes to the perception of the mentally ill as "other". It makes the discussion of these issues even more difficult if people think the only manifestations of mental illness are these extreme and often violent cases. In the journal article "Prevalence, Severity, and Unmet Need for Treatment of Mental Disorders

in the World Health Organization World Mental Health Surveys", it's explained that some 35-50% of serious cases of mental illnesses go untreated. Mental illness prevalence is very high, and yet nothing is done in the way that other general public health issues are addressed that have similar prevalence. But why is mental illness a sustainability problem, or a problem in general? Mental health issues lead to a variety of other harmful things and touch other serious sustainability issues in the economic, political and even environmental arena. Consumerism and exploitative capitalism can result from a society's obsession with improving standard of living at all costs in the hopes that doing so will bring satisfaction. This explains why poorer countries have much lower incidence of depression, which has been colloquially referred to as "the luxury disorder". When general questions of subsistence are answered each day, and endless avenues of economic mobility exist, humans can pursue economic materialism in the hope that it will bring satisfaction. I am painting with broad strokes, but this is perhaps a more nuanced light to view investment bankers and black market shoppers in than simply vilifying them as part of the machine. Our society accepts these values yet vilifies those who abuse substance, instead of viewing them as two sides of the same coin: a culture that is chronically unhappy and mentally ill.

I want to highlight one particular sustainability issue within the realm of mental health because I feel as though it gives a window into a number of other sustainability issues as well. About 2.5 million people are currently incarcerated in America, with a total of 7 million "under correctional supervision", meaning people on parole or probation. The US has the largest prison population in the world, housing 1/4 of all global prisoners. It costs the US about \$35,000 on average per inmate incarcerated. Half of all arrests are drug related and about the same percentage of inmates are doing time for such offenses. Some cursory math renders a figure of about \$45 billion to keep those folks in prison. These incarcerations disproportionately affect the black community. For example, african-americans and caucasians use

marijuana at comparable rates, but african-americans are four times as likely to be arrested. Following arrest, they are ten times as likely to get convicted. To understand some of why these figures are problematic, one only needs to look at who the top special interest groups are lobbying against the decriminalization of marijuana. They are, in order, police unions, private prison corporations, alcohol and beer companies, pharmaceutical companies, and prison guard unions. The drug war represents a massive amount of money, and many have incentive to perpetuate it rather than address it. All of these figures wouldn't be problematic if the drug war helped curb drug abuse and violence, but evidence only suggests that it perpetuates it, and drug abuse and incarceration statistics have increased with increased spending on the drug war. Lost in all of this is the mental health of those abusing drugs; no one seems to want to ask "Why?". Police covet positions as narcotics officers because they get an immense amount of overtime for filing arrest paperwork, and other formalities of arrests. Homicide unit officers may only book a handful of people a month while narcotics officers can arrest dozens. The system is designed to promote arrests because the numbers indicate success to the general public, but again, lost in all of this is the drug abuser. All of the administration of these policies and court proceedings cost money in addition to the cost of incarceration. Potential tax revenue is also lost by putting citizens in jail. Because of all of this, there are implications economically and socially for all citizens, not just drug abusers. Ethnic minorities are disproportionately affected.

If the drug war isn't addressed, then we will continue to waste money, imprison people, target minorities, and neglect folks who need counseling and support. Societally, looking at mental health as a whole, we will continue to see murder suicide, increased rates of depression, and loss of productivity and creativity. Drug abusers and mentally ill continue to be stigmatized and not helped, and this prevents important conversations from occurring. It turns sick people into a vicious cycle of prisoners, non-voters, jobless because of having to "check the box", and once again into prisoners. It once again makes mental illness into an "other" kind of issue and keeps people from discussing their own mental health issues.

To make progress, we need to end the drug war completely. Outlawing drugs does not affect their use and abuse. Legalizing or decriminalizing recreational drugs and putting in a different system for higher schedules of controlled substances (and reorganizing them). Fine drug abusers and require accepted counseling methods for mental health treatment. For mental health at large, we need to open up conversation about these issues, to understand what leads people to these places. We need to adopt a more nuanced view of people and try and sympathize with them rather than vilifying them, and understand what makes people truly happy, which people must do for themselves.

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